

Questions to Ask a Supplier

Workload. Does your supplier, whether internal or external, appear to have the time to devote to your project? If the work will be done internally, are you going to take something else off of the plates of the employees who will be responsible for the web presence? I often see web projects delegated from company owners to employees that already have too much to do. Owners and executives should keep in mind that the person who will be responsible for the web presence will need time to do that job on an ongoing basis. Avoid the temptation to think of the website as a project which, when completed, will not require continuous efforts of staff in terms of maintenance, monitoring, marketing, and improvement.

Commitment. Even if they have the time, do they (the web presence provider or in-house team) seem truly committed to providing a presence that will excel those of your competitors? Do all parties understand the time and effort that will be required to complete the project in a timely manner? Do the parties understand and appreciate the time and effort that will be required for continuing to maintain, monitor, market and improve the web presence?

Teamwork. Could you work with this team? Would you find working with them personally and professionally rewarding? Would each facet of the team be able to communicate and work well with the others, particularly the technical team? In my experience, it is important to actively solicit the ideas and alternatives that technical staff may have to offer. Not to say that these folks are good or bad, or to over-generalize, but experience says that technical people often don't offer dialogue and input on projects unless their contributions are courted.

Depth. How deep do capabilities run in each facet, technology, graphics, and marketing? I'm a big fan of being two-deep in every area of expertise for two reasons. First, I want to be covered in case anyone ever gets hit by the 'proverbial bus' - or just leaves. Second, I believe people perform better when they can bounce things off of someone with similar skills and experience.

Please note that, just because you have someone in desktop publishing in your company, those skills do not necessarily translate into web production skills.

Experience. Look for experience in your industry, and with building the functionality you desire.

Does the shop you're considering have any experience in your industry? Look at sites they've done that relate in some way to your business. Experience often translates across industries. If your goals include extensive online customer service, including self-service via the web, see what your potential supplier has in their portfolio along those lines.

Experience is particularly important in terms of marketing experience. Again, anyone can build a web presence that works. Anyone can make that presence look nice. You want someone who can help you build traffic.

Talk to your web development partnering candidates about their successes, and about their failures. Check their references. Ask references what they found to be the strengths and weaknesses of team members. Ask if there were there any surprises along the way.

If you have an advertising agency, will they be involved? Generally, at a minimum, agencies will provide raw materials to your web development team in the form of digital files from your print media. At most, they may take the marketing leadership role in the development of your web presence.

Do not automatically assume your ad agency has the capabilities to develop your web presence well. Unfortunately, many agencies, while they may do brilliant creative work and excel at traditional media work, do an awful job when it comes to the web. Apply the standards and questions discussed here to your agency.